N° 97. SATURDAY, *December* 9, 1786.

TO the feeling and the fusceptible there is fomething wonderfully pleafing in the contemplation of genius, of that fupereminent reach of mind by which fome men are diftinguifhed. In the view of highly fuperior talents, as in that of great and ftupendous natural objects, there is a fublimity which fills the foul with wonder and delight, which expands it, as it were, beyond its ufual bounds, and which, invefting our nature with extraordinary powers and extraordinary honours, interefts our curiofity, and flatters our pride.

This divinity of genius, however, which admiration is fond to worfhip, is beft arrayed in the darknefs of diftant and remote periods, and is not eafily acknowledged in the prefent times, or in places with which we are perfectly acquainted. Exclufive of all the deductions which envy or jealoufy may fometimes be fuppofed to make, there is a familiarity in the near approach of perfons around us, not very confiftent with the lofty ideas which we wifh to form of him who has led captive our imagination in the triumphs

triumph of his fancy, overpowered our feelings with the tide of paſſion, or enlightened our reaſon with the inveſtigation of hidden truths. It may be true, that "in the olden time" genius had ſome advantages which tended to its vigour and its growth; but it is not unlikely that, even in theſe degenerate days, it riſes much oftener than it is obſerved; that in "the ignorant preſent time" our poſterity may find names which they will dignify, though we neglected, and pay to their memory thoſe honours which their cotemporaries had denied them.

There is, however, a natural, and indeed a fortunate vanity in trying to redreſs this wrong which genius is expoſed to ſuffer. In the diſcovery of talents generally unknown, men are apt to indulge the ſame fond partiality as in all other diſcoveries which themſelves have made; and hence we have had repeated inſtances of painters and of poets, who have been drawn from obſcure ſituations, and held forth to public notice and applauſe by the extravagant encomiums of their introductors, yet in a ſhort time have ſunk again to their former obſcurity; whoſe merit, though perhaps ſomewhat neglected, did not appear to have been much undervalued by the world, and could not ſupport, by its own intrinſic excellence, that ſuperior place

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which the enthusiasm of its patrons would have assigned it.

I know not if I shall be accused of such enthusiasm and partiality, when I introduce to the notice of my readers a poet of our own country, with whose writings I have lately become acquainted; but if I am not greatly deceived, I think I may safely pronounce him a genius of no ordinary rank. The person to whom I allude is ROBERT BURNS, an *Ayrshire* ploughman, whose poems were some time ago published in a country-town in the west of Scotland, with no other ambition, it would seem, than to circulate among the inhabitants of the county where he was born, to obtain a little fame from those who had heard of his talents. I hope I shall not be thought to assume too much, if I endeavour to place him in a higher point of view, to call for a verdict of his country on the merit of his works, and to claim for him those honours which their excellence appears to deserve.

In mentioning the circumstance of his humble station, I mean not to rest his pretensions solely on that title, or to urge the merits of his poetry when considered in relation to the lowness of his birth, and the little opportunity of improvement which his education could afford. These particulars, indeed, might excite our

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wonder at his productions; but his poetry, considered abstractedly, and without the apologies arising from his situation, seems to me fully intitled to command our feelings, and to obtain our applause. One bar, indeed, his birth and education have opposed to his fame, the language in which most of his poems are written. Even in Scotland, the provincial dialect which Ramsay and he have used is now read with a difficulty which greatly damps the pleasure of the reader: in England it cannot be read at all, without such a constant reference to a glossary, as nearly to destroy that pleasure.

Some of his productions, however, especially those of the grave style, are almost English. From one of those I shall first present my readers with an extract, in which I think they will discover a high tone of feeling, a power and energy of expression, particularly and strongly characteristic of the mind and the voice of a poet. 'Tis from his poem intitled the *Vision*, in which the Genius of his native country, *Ayrshire*, is thus supposed to address him:

> With future hope, I oft would gaze,
> Fond, on thy little early ways,
> Thy rudely carrolled, chiming phrase,
> In uncouth rhymes,
> Fir'd at the simple, artless lays
> Of other times.

I ſaw thee ſeek the ſounding ſhore,
Delighted with the daſhing roar;
Or, when the North his fleecy ſtore
Drove through the ſky,
I ſaw grim Nature's viſage hoar
Strike thy young eye.

Or when the deep-green mantled earth,
Warm-cheriſhed every flowret's birth,
And joy and muſic pouring forth
In every grove,
I ſaw thee eye the general mirth
With boundleſs love.

When ripen'd fields and azure ſkies
Called forth the reapers ruſtling noiſe,
I ſaw thee leave their evening joys,
And lonely ſtalk,
To vent thy boſom's ſwelling riſe
In penſive walk.

When youthful love, warm-bluſhing, ſtrong,
Keen-ſhivering, ſhot thy nerves along,
Thoſe accents, grateful to thy tongue,
Th' adored name,
I taught thee how to pour in ſong,
To ſoothe thy flame.

I ſaw thy pulſe's maddening play,
Wild, ſend thee Pleaſure's devious way,
Miſled by Fancy's meteor-ray,
By Paſſion driven;
But yet the light that led aſtray
Was light from Heaven.

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Of ſtrains like the above, ſolemn and ſublime, with that rapt and inſpired melancholy in which the Poet lifts his eye "above this viſible "diurnal ſphere," the Poems intitled, *Deſpondency*, the *Lament*, *Winter, a Dirge*, and the Invocation to *Rain*, afford no leſs ſtriking examples. Of the tender and the moral, ſpecimens equally advantageous might be drawn from the elegiac verſes, intitled *Man was made to mourn*, from *The Cottar's Saturday Night*, the Stanzas *To a Mouſe*, or thoſe *To a Mountain-Daiſy*, on turning it down with the plough in April 1786. This laſt Poem I ſhall inſert entire, not from its ſuperior merit, but becauſe its length ſuits the bounds of my Paper.

* Wee, modeſt, crimſon tipped flower,
Thou's met me in an evil hour,
For I maun cruſh amang the ſtoure
Thy ſlender ſtem;
To ſpare thee now is paſt my power,
Thou bonie gem.

Alas! it's no thy neighbour ſweet,
The bony Lark, companion meet!
Bending thee 'mong the dewy weet
Wi' ſpreckled breaſt,
When upward-ſpringing, blythe to greet
The purpling eaſt.

* *Wee*, little; *maun*, muſt; *ſtoure*, duſt; *weet*, wet, a ſubſtantive; *cauld*, cold; *glinted*, peep'd; *bield*, ſhelter; *ſtane*, ſtone; *wa's*, walls; *hiſtie*, dry, chapt, barren.

Cauld blew the bitter-biting north
Upon thy early, humble birth;
Yet cheafully thou glinted forth
Amid the ſtorm,
Scarce rear'd above the parent-earth
Thy tender form.

The flaunting flowers our gardens yield,
High-shelt'ring woods and wa's maun ſhield;
But thou beneath the random bield
Of clod or ſtane,
Adorns the hiſtie ſtubble-field,
Unſeen, alane.

There, in thy ſcanty mantle clad,
Thy ſnowy boſom ſun-ward ſpread,
Thou lifts thy unaſſuming head,
In humble guiſe;
But now the *ſhare* uptears thy bed,
And low thou lies!

Such is the fate of artleſs maid,
Sweet flow'ret of the rural ſhade!
By Love's ſimplicity betray'd,
And guileleſs truſt,
Till ſhe, like thee, all ſoil'd, is laid
Low in the duſt.

Such is the fate of ſimple bard,
On Life's rough ocean luckleſs ſtarr'd!
Unſkilful he to note the card
Of prudent lore,
Till billows rage, and gales blow hard,
And whelm him o'er!

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Such fate to suff'ring worth is given,
Who long with wants and woes has ſtriven,
By human pride or cunning driven
To Miſery's brink,
Till, wrench'd of every ſtay but Heaven,
He ruined ſink.

Ev'n thou who mourn'ſt the daiſy's fate,
That fate is thine —— No diſtant date;
Stern Ruin's plough-ſhare drives, elate,
Full on thy bloom,
Till cruſh'd beneath the furrow's weight,
Shall be thy doom.

I have ſeldom met with an image more truly paſtoral than that of the lark, in the ſecond ſtanza. Such ſtrokes as theſe mark the pencil of the poet, which delineates Nature with the preciſion of intimacy, yet with the delicate colouring of beauty and of taſte.

The power of genius is not leſs admirable in tracing the manners, than in painting the paſſions, or in drawing the ſcenery of Nature. That intuitive glance with which a writer like *Shakeſpeare* diſcerns the characters of men, with which he catches the many changing hues of life, forms a ſort of problem in the ſcience of mind, of which it is eaſier to ſee the truth than to aſſign the cauſe. Though I am very far from meaning to compare our ruſtic bard to

Shakeſpeare, yet whoever will read his lighter and more humorous poems, his *Dialogue of the Dogs*, his *Dedication to G—— H——, Eſq*; his *Epiſtles to a young friend*, and *to W. S—— n*, will perceive with what uncommon penetration and ſagacity this Heaven-taught ploughman, from his humble and unlettered ſtation, has looked upon men and manners.

Againſt ſome paſſages of thoſe laſt-mentioned poems it has been objected, that they breathe a ſpirit of libertiniſm and irreligion. But if we conſider the ignorance and fanaticiſm of the lower claſs of people in the country where theſe poems were written, a fanaticiſm of that pernicious ſort which ſets *faith* in oppoſition to *good works*, the fallacy and danger of which, a mind ſo enlightened as our Poet's could not but perceive; we ſhall not look upon his lighter Muſe as the enemy of religion (of which in ſeveral places he expreſſes the juſteſt ſentiments), tho' ſhe has ſometimes been a little unguarded in her ridicule of hypocriſy.

In this, as in other reſpects, it muſt be allowed that there are exceptionable parts of the volume he has given to the public, which caution would have ſuppreſſed, or correction ſtruck out; but Poets are ſeldom cautious, and our Poet had, alas! no friends or companions from whom correction could be obtained. When

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we reflect on his rank in life, the habits to which he muſt have been ſubject, and the ſociety in which he muſt have mixed, we regret perhaps more than wonder, that delicacy ſhould be ſo often offended in peruſing a volume in which there is ſo much to intereſt and to pleaſe us.

Burns poſſeſſes the ſpirit as well as the fancy of a poet. That honeſt pride and independence of ſoul which are ſometimes the Muſe's only dower, break forth on every occaſion in his works. It may be, then, I ſhall wrong his feelings, while I indulge my own, in calling the attention of the public to his ſituation and circumſtances. That condition, humble as it was, in which he found content, and wooed the Muſe, might not have been deemed uncomfortable; but grief and misfortunes have reached him there; and one or two of his poems hint, what I have learnt from ſome of his countrymen, that he has been obliged to form the reſolution of leaving his native land, to ſeek under a Weſt-Indian clime that ſhelter and ſupport which Scotland has denied him. But I truſt means may be found to prevent this reſolution from taking place; and that I do my country no more than juſtice, when I ſuppoſe her ready to ſtretch out her hand to cheriſh

and retain this native Poet, whoſe "wood-notes "wild" poſſeſs ſo much excellence. To repair the wrongs of ſuffering or neglected merit; to call forth genius from the obſcurity in which it had pined indignant, and place it where it may profit or delight the world; theſe are exertions which give to wealth an enviable ſuperiority, to greatneſs and to patronage a laudable pride.

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